

Old adults and educational practices: the case of a Portuguese Third Age University

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Abstract

The present work sets itself to study the educational activities aimed at the elderly within an non-formal educational context, more specifically within the framework of a Third Age University. According to the two main theoretical perspectives responsible for shaping the discussion and practices in the education of the elderly, namely the perspective of functionalist educational gerontology and the critical educational gerontology theories, the current study aims at equating the different educational activities that were developed within a Third Age University. Some lines of thought of the functionalist perspective such as the theory of activity assume that the elderly must keep active in order to avoid decline. Such envisaged activities are extensions of the activities undertaken during the working years and are believed to be beneficial to the retirees. However, this new busy and dynamic way of living the later years, involved in different educational, cultural and recreational activities is not a reality for all the elderly but is rather close to those with a Middle Class social standing. The analysis of Lenoir (1979) as well as Guillemard (1972) shows how the social practices of the retirees are conditioned by their respective social standing and the differences in the capital accrued through their lives, especially during the working years. Therefore, the access to culture and education can be limited to a restricted number of retirees and elderly.

On the other hand, critical gerontology aims at changing the situation regarding the education for the elderly, allowing for a real change in the lives of the elderly as well as a democratisation in their access to culture and education. Within this theoretical framework, the education of the elderly is not perceived as just a way to “kill time” or “avoid ageing” but something that overcomes these goals without denying them or rendering them impossible. It aims at the transformation of the reality of each student within the concept of a liberating education according to Freire or ‘empowerment’ according to Cusack.

These theoretical approaches allowed us to analyse a Third Age University in respect to its educational project and prevailing underlying educational theory, the objectives its set out to achieve, the educational practices and its intended student population.

We chose to undertake an empirical investigation inspired on the same methodology principles as the case study, as it allows for an understanding of the social processes that take place within the non-formal education context. This way, research took the shape of an ethnographic type study where fieldwork techniques were used such as observation, interviews and documentary research, among others. The fieldwork took place from April 2001 to October 2002.

One of the conclusions of the present study is that the “traditional” and “classical” school model is only partially rejected and we cannot say that the University’s educational/cultural project is guided by the liberating and emancipating education principles of Freire or the ones adapted by Glendenning and Battersby for the education of the elderly. It was also found that the university caters for a privileged group of elderly with a middle class social standing.

Keywords: policies of third age, educational gerontology and universities of Third Age.

Introduction

Our study aims at studying the educational activities developed in an informal framework of education of the elderly, in particular in a Third Age University. In the light of the two theoretical approaches that have shaped the discussion and practice of adult education, namely the functionalist and the educational critical gerontology theories, the different educational activities that took place in a Third Age University (TAU) are studied.

These theoretical approaches allow an analysis of the Third Age University in relation to its educational project, the prevalent conception of education, its goals, educational practices and audience.

After developing the theoretical framework and performing research of ethnographic nature, we set out to investigate during the course of this work if the Third Age University of our choice is aimed at middle class elderly, in terms of the most represented population. Also, the study will bear in mind that this social class will set itself apart from the negative image of sickness and poverty associated with older persons and, through the TAU, middle class retired people will be able to maintain a prestigious standing, setting themselves apart from a negative image of old age characteristic of a fourth age, but rather enhancing several autonomous abilities.

Within the chosen non-schooling educational context of the empirical investigation, we also wish to account for some dynamics and logic that represent the way stakeholders perceive, realize and practice their own educational and cultural projects for the elderly. Therefore, we

start this study with a brief discussion of the two main theories of educational gerontology followed by an analysis of the Third Age University.

1. The different theoretical approaches of educational

In the area of education of elderly adults there are two main references sociological perspectives. Taking the path of different authors in the area of educational gerontology (Glendennig 1990, 2000; Withnall 2000, 2002; Phillipson 1999; Cusack 2000; Formosa 2002), there are references to educational gerontology and critical educational gerontology pointing to the different theoretical approaches that have dominated the analysis and study and founded the practices in this field. Educational gerontology is normally associated with the functionalist approach while the critical gerontology is related to the critical theory.

1.1. The functionalist approach

This sociological approach dominated the field of gerontology up to the end of the 70's. Since the 1940's, this approach had at its core "the issues related with 'adjustment', 'activity' and 'life satisfaction'" (Phillipson, 1999, p. 120).

The functionalist approach within the field of gerontology gave rise to two theories that have dealt with the study of ageing and issues related to old age. These are the Activity Theory and the Disengagement Theory. The disengagement theory was defended by Elaine Cumming & William Henry, in 1961, and it was introduced and tested in the book *Growing Old. The Process of Disengagement*. Essentially, the theory proposes that with age people withdraw from society and give up some of their social roles. According to this theory, this process is inevitable and many relationships come to an end and those that remain suffer quality changes. This process of rupture and separation, that is disengagement from others and society, varies from person to person in terms of the time it starts as well as the degree to which it affects different people. (Cumming & Henry, 1961, pp. 14-15).

Criticism to the Disengagement Theory was put forward by Bond, Briggs & Coleman (1996), who point out that the disengagement is not inevitable as the theory assumes but rather the non-occupation is a life style of some of the elderly. On the other hand, the theory foresees the disengagement of the elderly as serving the purpose of preparation for death and it does not demand nor defends a policy for third age that deals with its respective issues but rather implies a policy of indifference (cf. Bond, Briggs & Coleman, 1996,).

According to Loether (1975), the Activity Theory encompasses two main themes: Persistence and Change of Roles. The first – Persistence – was defended by Madox, and supports the idea that the level of activity should be maintained into old age.

The other theme in the Activity Theory was analysed by Robert Havighurst and deals with the issue of changing roles, as there is a change in the activities in old age. Further to this change, each individual must be flexible to adapt to it. It is assumed, from empirical research, the undertaking of multiple roles after retirement is positively related to happiness and good social adaptation during old age (cf. Havighurst, 1954, p. 309).

This role change implies that people have capacity to adapt to new experiences and this capacity or personal ability Havighurst (1954, p. 309) named *role flexibility*. To develop this personal ability one needs to invest in a variety of roles experienced positively during one's middle years. These roles are considered by this perspective as adequate to the elderly as well as necessary so they can feel happy and adapted to society.

Because this perspective prescribes a variety of roles that the elderly have to undertake in order to attain happiness and be socially adjusted, we consider it is presupposed the elderly are a homogeneous group in social, cultural and economic terms and it does not take into account the social inequalities that characterise the reality of a social heterogeneous group. In "prescribing" an active lifestyle so that the elderly continue to be autonomous and "happy", this perspective is concerned with certain social groups of elderly people that recognise themselves in such practices and therefore presumes a lifestyle of the elderly with a specific cultural, economic and social capital.

Such functionalist perspectives that dominated social and educational gerontology have received some criticism. One author who analysed such perspectives in social gerontology was Guillemard (1980, 1986). In brief, the author highlights that the elderly are represented as a unified and homogeneous group without taking into account the differences that arise in the ageing process in terms of several variables such as the social class that one belongs to. According to the author, the Activity Theory assumes a successful way of ageing and living through retirement that is characterised by a sustained level of mental and physical activity comparable to the standard of active adults, in order to delay the any physical and mental effects due to the biological ageing.

In line with Guillemard, other authors in the field of educational gerontology such as Glendenning e Battersby (1990) have also criticised the functionalist paradigm. These authors criticised the fact that educational gerontology consider older people as a homogeneous group and does not take into consideration the differences due to social class, gender and ethnicity. They argue that it is urgent to equate the concept of education of the elderly in terms of a socio-political framework so that the deterministic stance of this group can be overcome. They also alerted to the need to promote a debate on the objectives and goals of the education of the elderly, since many of the educational activities are aimed preferentially to middle class elderly and do not promote the democratization of education. Further to this concern on equal opportunities, the authors make the proposition that education should avoid the marginalisation of the elderly in society (Glendenning & Battersby, 1990, pp. 223-225).

1.2. The critical perspective and critical educational gerontology

This way the aforementioned authors subscribe to a new theoretical approach that was denominated critical gerontology.

One of the concerns of this critical perspective is to contribute to the resolution of social inequalities that the elderly experience on their daily lives through a liberating and emancipating education, following the line of thought of Freire amongst other authors. According to Freire, the liberating education implies that the banking conception of education is replaced by a liberating education that presumes a dialogue between two cognoscente subjects that equate the issue as “understanding critically how they are in the world, where and with whom they are” (Freire, 1975, p. 102).

This conception of education understands and presumes that education is not neutral and “is closely related to multiple instances of domination and subordination – and, essentially, to the struggles to deconstruct and construct those relationships” (Apple, 1998, p. 28). However and despite the domination aspect, it is possible to operate a social transformation in which the liberating education can play an important role, allowing to the dominated a critical understanding of that very same situation, within the limitations of education recognised by Freire (Freire, 1997, pp. 126-127).

According to Phillipson and Cusack, the marginalisation of older adults is starting to be conceived and considered not only in terms of social class, economic, cultural and social factors but also in terms of the marginalisation that retired people can experience because they are retired, over a certain age and excluded from the production sphere. Ageism and discrimination of retired people is also associated with stereotypes giving rise to some identity problems inherent to a post-modern society (Cusack, 2000).

2. Empirical research

We start by outlining the reasons that led to our choice of an empirical research of ethnographic nature or, in other words, a qualitative investigation, as it lent itself to explore intensively the subject of our study: a Third Age University in Portugal.

A research inspired in the methodology principles of the case study, in the weberian sense, allows the understanding of the social processes that take place in this non-formal educational context and also gather data to deeply characterise this reality.

This way, the present research followed a study format of “ethnographic nature” in the sense that not always the totality of the dimensions that characterise a full ethnographic study were utilised such as “ long stay of the field investigator, the contact with other cultures and the use of broad social categories in the analysis of the data” (André, 1995, p. 28). The data gathering techniques used were: direct observation, interview, survey by questionnaire and

documentary research. The fieldwork at the Third Age University took place between April 2001 and October 2002.

3. Study of a Third Age University: The University of Culture and Leisure

The Third Age University under examination is located in a town in northern Portugal and we named it University of Culture and Leisure. We will not use the University's real name in order to preserve the anonymity of the sources and safeguard the ethical principles of research in the social sciences (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994). Further more the name chosen attempts to translate the significant dimensions surrounding the organisation of this social space.

This university was born in 1994, from the will of a group of people with different professional backgrounds, some of them already retired. The path that led to its official recognition in 1994 first started in 1992, during a meeting of another association during which a teacher raised the idea of starting a Third Age University in town.

The secondary teacher, already retired, had previous work experience in another Portuguese Third Age University and contacts with a counterpart institution in Galicia, Spain.

During the path of consolidation and creation of the Third Age University, the contact with another similar institution in Oporto was an important milestone in providing information and advice as well as support in the planning and organisation of a project of this nature. Without going into much detail surrounding all the preparation work that led to the opening of the University of Culture and Leisure, the work group grew to 11 members that founded the cooperative, meeting the legal minimum of 10 members required to start the process.

3.1. Choosing a working model: Between social and schooling

The goals of this organisation are outlined in paragraph 3 of its statutory declaration, stating that retired people are to be socially integrated and have access to culture through educational activities and social support.

At the very start, the implementation of the previous goals wasn't a peaceful process, especially regarding who should be deciding on such activities. The original working group members were predominantly retired teachers and that lead to an inception of this educational/cultural of this project very close to a formal educational context.

The similarities with a formal educational context started as soon as the Pedagogical Council (PC), a typical body in many educational organisations, was set up and conflicts arose immediately between the board of directors and the PC. At the time, the president of the PC of the University of Culture and Leisure considered it was the body's exclusive competency to plan and decide on the activities to be implemented as well as other pedagogical matters.

Other social bodies such as the board of directors and the assembly were prevented from planning and making decisions on matters considered pedagogical. Furthermore, according to some members, the PC should be comprised exclusively of teachers. Often the PC decided on pedagogical matters related to cultural activities without consideration of previous decisions taken by the board of directors or without informing the board of such decisions.

Such ideas and attitudes caused internal conflicts, mainly between the president of the board of directors and the president of the PC. The former, who wasn't a teacher, believed that the exclusivity reserved to the teachers on pedagogical matters did not make much sense because in his opinion all board members had the capacity to participate in decisions regarded as pedagogical without the need of being a teacher. The later, the president of the PC, was a retired teacher, defended this area as reserved to teachers.

This disagreement towards the PC did not seem to be a simple antagonism against this body but could comprise a broader aspect: the rejection of the idea of traditional schooling itself. Also in question is the decision capacity and the power of certain bodies or particular groups that comprise these bodies: those who are teachers and those who are not.

The justification supporting the non replication of a schooling model was based at first by the intention of the leadership group that promoted the idea but, in a second instance by the elderly themselves that attended the University, as the following text shows:

"If there was the intention to create a school, the initial commission and the legal consultant would have included this [idea] in the statutory regulations and instead of referring to a 'cultural and social cooperative' they would have referred to 'an educational cooperative'! And even if at any stage a traditional school was created the natural evolution of things would force us to go back because, in fact, the majority of the people that attend (...) (The University of Culture and Leisure) do not want this! No one after 60 wants to go back to a traditional school!" (President of the Board of Directors, Magazine of the University of Culture and Leisure, 1999, pp. 16-17, parenthesis of our own authorship).

The disagreement that turned into a conflict on occasions ended at the end of the first year of operations of the University of Culture and Leisure, when the president of the PC left and the competencies of his respective body were redefined.

In an informal conversation, the president of the board of directors mentioned that the PC should no longer be an executive body but be limited to a consulting body only.

Apart from the controversy if the University of Culture and Leisure should be considered a school or not, another model was proposed regarding the future of the organisation: Should the institution be a Day Care Centre for the elderly.

The model of Day Care Centre did not evolve in the way as the school model did but was rather a questioning process about the possibility of the University to become a Day Care facility.

However, the issue is not a simple negation of both modes of operation. The goal is rather to extract the positive aspects of both models. The idea of what the University of Culture and Leisure should be is defined in the following passage of a magazine of this institution:

“That is why I have always defended that (the University of Culture and Leisure) should be something hybrid, something new that can have in all plenitude the good things from one and the other of those entities” (President of the board of directors, 1999, p.17, parenthesis of our own authorship).

The president of the board of directors continued to put forward his idea of what the University of Culture and Leisure should be, highlighting the dimensions that he considered to be characteristics of a schooling education but with certain particularities:

“(…) “didactic” activities without fixed or predefined curricular content, or rather permanently guided by the aptitude of the people attending the weekly work sessions. Where the “teachers” behave mainly as supervisors of the work sessions and the research carried out by their “students”. Where the choice of supervisors, and their previously established capability is an assurance of the technical and pedagogical quality of the subject at hand. Where there is no interference, always pernicious, between the didactic/pedagogic component and the social/administrative component” (President of the board of directors, Magazine of the University of Culture and Leisure, 1999, p.17).

Further to this, the president of the board of directors identified the importance of recognising the extra curricular/schooling areas that should be considered “positive” characteristics of a Day Care Centre. This way, he added that the University of Culture and Leisure should be:

“(…) a place where all who do not have much aptitude for didactic activities can have a place in their own right and want to take part in other cultural and social activities also foreseen in the statutory goals. In my opinion, “social support, educational and recreational activities” are the ONLY goals mentioned in the statutes of (...) (The University of Culture and Leisure) and should not, in any circumstance, be minimised and reduced to just didactic/school actions!” (President of the board of directors, Magazine of The University of Culture and Leisure, 1999, p.17, parenthesis of our own authorship).

However, this similarity with a Day Care Centre has many reservations and was made rather distant:

“(...) but, we do not want a Day Care Centre as a repository of people. We do not want to be that at all.” (President of the board of directors, Field Diary, 18/5/2001).

The *latent* goal of the University of Culture and Leisure is above all “not to be mistaken for an institution for the poor little elderly”, so they are not mistaken themselves for “poor little elderly” people and treated accordingly.

This *latent* goal manifested itself throughout the investigation, in particular in an informal conversation with the president of the board of directors about the removal of the University of Culture and Leisure from a list where it was classified as a social solidarity institution supporting the elderly. This was received with great pleasure, at least by the president of the board of directors, because the removal from the list meant that the university was no longer “confused or mistaken for an institution for the poor little elderly” and this aspect is not sought but rather refused.

The university's link with culture, means above all a dissociation from the image of the elderly from which they wish to distance themselves. This translates into a cut from an image of the elderly as decrepit, deformed, sick, dependent and useless. This image is associated both to the elderly from the asylum as well as the elderly that suffer from physical and mental limitations that integrate the so called *fourth age*.

The identification with the terminology *third age* and the rejection of the word elderly is also a sign of the desired rupture with old age:

“I react in horror to the word elderly, however third age does not bother me, it is the age when professional activity ceases but there are other activities” (President of the board of directors, Field Diary, 18/5/2001).

3.2. Characterisation of students of the University of Culture and Leisure

The number of students has risen significantly throughout the years. The university started activities with 86 students in 1994 and in 2002 there were already 343 students.

In 2002, we performed a survey to 150 associates, the approximate number of students that effectively attended the university, and we had 74 replies.

This university is not an exception in the universe of similar institutions and we found a rate of 81% (60) of women in the total of the respondent population.

In this university the respondents have ages between 54 and 69. Despite the fact that this institution does not impose age limits to its students, we observed a higher rate of people

with ages comprised between 54 and 79. A more detailed analysis of the age distribution reveals a stronger trend, with the bracket 60 to 64 with the higher number of respondents (21) and the one with the lowest is 75 to 79, with only 7 people. The predominance in the younger age brackets is related to the fact people in their fourth age, considered to be the bracket 70-75, have greater mental and physical limitations due to disease or age related degeneration rendering the attendance of such institutions more problematic, as they often need other types of care. Therefore, Third Age Universities are frequented by an elderly population that is younger than the population attending Day Care facilities or nursing homes.

The great majority of respondents are retired (80%), with limited numbers of people still in the workforce (8%), very few despite being retired still have some sort of work (5%) and the remainder did not answer (7%).

As far as education is concerned the more represented set of the respondents have *Curso Médio*¹ (29.7%), this was easily predicted given the fact that this group is predominantly made of primary teachers, an area of study that did not have a *Curso Superior* as nowadays. There is also a high percentage with *Quinto ano do Curso Geral dos Liceus*² – 23% of the respondents. The percentage of respondents with Year 4 is close to that of respondents with *Curso Superior* 15% and 14% respectively.

We verify that the majority of respondents have average schooling capital and if we take into consideration the time when they were students, their diplomas are even more relevant, as access and equal opportunities to schooling were then restricted.

In the present work, the analysis of the standing in social class of the students is considered important because it will contribute to determine the population of elderly that attends the University of Culture and Leisure, keeping in mind the expectation of our research which raises the issue that the Third Age University is attended mainly by middle class older adults. Therefore, the analysis of the social standing of the students is an aspect that the research had to tackle.

The relevance of the class standing of the elderly population of the University of Culture and Leisure is also related to the perceptions and the ways of living the retired years vary and are conditioned by the social class each retiree belongs to.

The importance of social class as a factor that conditions the conception retired people have of retirement and the way they live it has been highlighted by different authors such as Lenoir (1979), Guillemard (1972, 1980, 1986) e Estes (1991). The first two have developed analysis and studies that relate the social class of retired people with the perception of retirement and the lifestyle of retired people. They reach the conclusion that the lifestyle of retired people is conditioned by the social class they belong to and Guillemard (1972) highlighted the fact that

¹ [Translation Note] Before the Bologna Agreement university degrees in Portugal were divided into *Curso Médio* – typically three years of study; and *Curso Superior* – Typically four to five years of study.

² [Translation Note] *Quinto ano do Curso Geral dos Liceus* corresponds roughly to Year 9 at present.

such a lifestyle is dependent/conditioned by the professional activity undertaken during their active life.

Other aspects that also contribute to the differences among the elderly are, for example, “biological factors and genetic predispositions but also and fundamentally (...) social and cultural factors” (Perista, Baptista, Freitas, Perista & Leça, 1997, p. 36).

The determination of the social class standing is an issue that can raise complex questions. One of these is the fact, especially in Marxist analyses, the elderly are no longer part of the production sphere and, as we know, in these perspectives the standing relative to production is determining to the analysis of the social class standing.

Estes (1991) highlighted the fact that in a situation of retirement, income and property continue to be the determining factor of social class standing in capitalist societies. And, in this case the income of some retired people comes from pensions that in turn are related to the professions held in the past. This way, the Welfare State replicates, through the retirement systems, the social inequalities based in social classes.

Despite these limitations, we consider relevant the analysis of social class of the retired population given that:

- The social classes determine the perception of retirement and the lifestyle of the retirees, be it through the internalisation of their living conditions that condition the practices or by the access to goods and services conditioned by the differences in capital that they hold;
- The amounts of the pensions are dependent of professions held in the past;

These two aspects underline the importance of the analysis of the social class of the retirees, keeping in mind the professions held in the past.

Therefore, taking into account the object and objectives of the study, we found important to choose an analysis of the social standing of the students following the typology of class and class fractions that Almeida et al (1988) conceived and made some necessary adaptations.

From this analysis we get a class standing of “pre-retirement”, that is a class standing resulting from the standing one had in the production sphere before entering retirement, allowing the inference from this former standing an approximate present social standing of each of the students.

In our study, we consider important the cultural capital in its institutionalised state, as we are dealing with an institution of educational and cultural nature. Therefore, the variables used were the profession held and the level of schooling. This is because schooling has an important role “in the structuring of the space of social class, be it through the impact it has in the division of labour or as a fundamental component- though not exclusive- of cultural capital and, therefore, of lifestyles as well as a specifically structural vector of social trajectories” (Almeida, Costa e Machado, 1988, p. 21).

Also in this study, the unit of analysis was the individual and we did not include the standing within the domestic group of each associate respondent as foreseen because the answers regarding partners were reduced and did not allow an adequate analysis. Because of this, we limited ourselves to the analysis of the social standing of the associate respondents.

The analysis of the results reveals a great concentration of middle classes mainly a small contextualised technical bourgeoisie and the near absence of proletariat and bourgeoisie, although the latter had a small number without significance. The overwhelming majority of the respondents belong to the small bourgeoisie, confirming the central hypothesis of the present work.

3.3. Analysis of the educational activities

Taking into account the different perspectives of educational gerontology, the educational practices of this Third Age University were briefly analysed.

Regarding the way the cultural activities took place that is if a “school” model is replicated or not in which the content is transmitted in an asymmetrical relationship between teacher and student, changing from activity to activity or better still from teacher to teacher. From direct observations made to 15 of the 20 activities in operation at the time, we observed diversity in the methodology in use as well as the type of relationship established between teacher and student. From situations where the teacher took a role of “supervisor”, stimulating the participation and involvement of the students with a certain closeness in the relationship; to situations where the teacher was more centralising without being “supervisor/promoter” but transferring knowledge with an asymmetric pedagogic relationship. In short, the diversity of educational situations resulted a great deal from the different characteristics of the teachers such as pedagogic character, scientific rigour and personality, reverting to the importance of the tripartite training of “teachers” (know/knowledge, know/how to, know/to be). The capacity to work with adults and the understanding of their critical perspectives of the world also influenced the way the activities took place.

In general, within this heterogeneous reality and taking into account the activities observed by us, there was a majority of educational situations where the teacher sought to establish a close relationship with the students, but not between two cognoscente beings, according to Freire, nor promoting a situation of *empowerment*. Many of the teachers “supervise” the students to interest them and involve them in the different activities but without seeking outcomes related with the critical analysis of the world. The interest registered in certain subjects or work activities, the closeness of the relationships established between certain teachers and their students as well as the recognition of the scientific knowledge of certain teachers translates into a high number of participants in these activities and in some cases lead to changes such as rostered classes, room changes or caps in the number of students.

Conclusion

As the presented study unfolded, we had the opportunity to observe the way the University structured itself with its great objective with a two fold repercussion. On one hand, there is the insistence in not being mistaken for a Day Care Centre. Therefore, a completely different model of operation from the Day Care Centre was chosen with the intention of distancing themselves from a social representation of the elderly as a person with limited capacity – physical and intellectual -, sick and poor. On the other hand, the university, as part of its great objective, also wanted to distance itself from the “school” model in the “classic” or more “traditional” sense of the word. However, this image of school is only partially set aside and only in the aspects that are perceived as most negative. This denial of the school model is realised mainly by the denial of some members of the Board of Directors in accepting some of the ruling bodies of the school. Such was the case of the Pedagogic Council, comprised only by teachers with exclusive competencies in pedagogic issues. This gave rise to a decreased decision capacity of the Board of Directors during the first year of operations, as only teachers were recognised as competent in pedagogic issues.

Understandably, the assimilation of the “positive” characteristics of the School institution lends itself to the promotion of a value added image of the people that attend the University, presenting them as people with full capacity regarding their learning abilities, amongst other potentials

Therefore, we could say that this Third Age University gave rise to a learning space that, at its own rhythm, promoted the aptitudes of those who attended it and also promoted a lifestyle, in the sense of Weber (1993), emphasising their physical and mental autonomy and therefore differentiating them from the elderly with less economic, physical and intellectual resources. However, during the investigation it became apparent that the “traditional” and “classic” model of School was only partially rejected and one cannot say that the educational/cultural project undertaken by the this University is ruled by the principles of the liberating and emancipating education preconised by Freire and adopted for the education of the elderly by Glendenning and Battersby.

We need to mention the little understanding evidenced by some of the teachers on issues pertaining to adult education and trends in pedagogy for adults and the elderly. This may have contributed to the replication of the model they knew and felt comfortable with, that is the model of school education.

Fundamentally, one could say the project of these Universities allows the elderly with a middle class social standing to keep their social standing while the Universities help their students to distance themselves from certain negative images of the elderly and old age.

At the same time, we can conclude that the retired attending this University, as they seek to distance themselves from a negative image of decrepitude and low social standing, fail to

reach a situation of *empowerment*, in the sense of Cusack, as they do not promote, amongst other aspects, an emancipating education.

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